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ABSTRACT

From the earliest literary forms, myths, parables, and oral histories, literature has held human values up to the light and given life to the problems of being human. Little else in students' lives provides room for the consideration of values and provides them with a foundation to understand and confront the unavoidable failures and even successes of life. In spite of literature's importance in illuminating values, literature enrollments have declined in both two- and four-year colleges; English departments are focusing increasingly on writing; and the English major itself is changing to require more writing and less literature. Some trends, however, offer a ray of light for literature courses, such as, the groundswell for increasing liberal education for all students and the interest of older students in literature and other enrichment courses. Given the curricular prominence of career education and the tendency of vocational students and their advisors to avoid literature classes, liberal arts faculty should explore ways of tightening the ties between career and liberal education. Team-taught courses, emphasizing the applicability of literature to particular careers, operate as an important recruitment tool. Community business leaders, who have an understanding of the value of liberal arts for business and industry, should be invited to share their perceptions with the makers of career program curricula. Separating liberal arts and career preparation reflects a dangerous and destructive dualism, which must be overcome. (LAL)

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TEACHING VALUES THROUGH LITERATURE IN VOCATIONAL CURRICULA

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TEACHING VALUES THROUGH LITERATURE IN VOCATIONAL CURRICULA

Does literature teach values? Of course. From the earliest literary forms, myths, parables, and oral histories, literature has given life to the problems of being human. In fact, that would be my definition of literature: the working out, the holding up to the light, of values--some spurious, some prized; some temporary, some eternal. Storytelling adds something indispensable to our view of reality; we perceive a broadened range of human emotion, complexity, and possibility.

What are some of the value questions addressed by literature?

Is reason of any value, when life seems so random?
What is worthwhile? What is beautiful?
How do we deal with pain? loss? success?
What makes life rewarding? worthless?
What is love, and being loved?
What is freedom? duty, responsibility?
Is happiness to be valued?

Where other than literature do students broaden their values? The media? Not much help. Taking the 6:00 news as illustrative, we find 1/3 news headlines, 1/3 sports--1/3 weather. The advertising that follows is no help either,

featuring pimple-off creams, cola drinks, high-fiber cereals, and new cars that bring dates, energy, and high status.

What about our educational system? Not much room for consideration of values there, either. Schools are pressed from all sides to become essentially technical training institutions, with the major emphasis on "How to--" not "WhY?" "Is it of value?" The insistence on technical training comes from society which needs a trained workforce, from the person footing the bill for the college education, and from the student himself, who wants to graduate as quickly as possible to make big money so he can move out of his parents' house, buy a car, and live his high status fantasy life.

There is little time for what Faulkner in his Nobel acceptance speech called the "verities," the "truths of the human heart." Consequently, when the young confront the unavoidable ambiguities, pain, failures, and even successes of life they have little foundation or assistance to understand and live through them with dignity. What they know best are avoidance tools like alcohol, drugs, or pounding rhythms.

Scott Fitzgerald, in a similar situation at the time of his crack-up, found that the shallow, alcoholic world of the 20s was over. He was forced to re-examine his scale of values and found it incredibly difficult, like, he said, "the moving

about of great secret trunks."

Having established that literature is important in illuminating values, how many students are we touching in this way? Not very many; not nearly enough. Charles Moran, in the CCHA HUMANITIES REVIEW (Winter 1983-84) cited some dismal statistics about literature courses in higher education.

He tells us that literature enrollment has declined in both 2 and 4-year colleges. The emphasis in English departments is increasingly on writing (60% of all courses); fewer than 1/3 of the courses are literature. These figures are even more exaggerated in two-year colleges, since writing courses are most often studied in the first two years. As an example, in our college the proportion of writing to literature courses is 70% writing sections; 30% literature.

Moran also notes that 77% of the surveyed institutions require a writing course; only 32% require a literature course. Even the English major itself is changing, requiring more writing and less literature. To those of us who believe there is a relationship between the reading of literature and good writing, in addition to the value of literature in teaching values, this is discouraging.

Sometimes lit profs feel like monks in the Dark Ages, hidden in dark cloisters, trying to keep learning alive, for a world

that doesn't care.

There is a little light. One, there is a welcome groundswell for increasing liberal education for all students. However, it's only a little light, for the entire groundswell won't fill more than one or two lit classes per campus--if that. The majority of students still will not be involved in the study of literature or other liberal arts.

Another ray of light is the increasing average student age. The older student is more likely to take liberal arts courses or even major in liberal arts. Dean Stedman, of the 50,000-student New York University School of Continuing Education, said recently, "There are a lot of adults who are interested in pursuing liberal arts...you are going to see the emergence of more structured liberal arts courses." Also, there are indications that liberal arts as enrichment for graduates is increasing.

Such enrichment courses, though, will change the way our courses are delivered. They will require greater flexibility in time, place, and content. Instead of 13-week courses offered three times a week on campus, we may be offering courses in 8, 12, or 16 segments in corporate offices, urban hotels, or industrial training centers. And, the content may be adjusted. The demand may be not only for the classics of Western literature, but the Literature of China and Japan, the Middle East, or Latin America, for international-oriented

companies. Or, they may prefer Money in Literature or Literature and Technology.

However, still most important will be what happens on our own campuses. Seventy-five percent of all credit hours on our campus are still generated by students 24 and under. And it is here that competition is intense. Most students are enrolled in rigid, inflexible career programs. On our campus the ratio is 71:29, and those 71% career students are not noted for taking literature courses.

Career programs by their very title enjoy an important semantic advantage, in contrast to the Liberal Arts, for the word "career" implies vocation, a job. Career students have immediate identifiable payoffs, complete with impressive titles that suggest 3-piece suits: accountant, market researcher, systems analyst, electrical engineer. Since there is no job title of liberal arts, the liberal arts student suffers under the unexplainable (What are liberal arts?) and the expendable (Who needs liberal arts?). Liberal arts, to a 19-year old seem above and beyond what's necessary for a life, something to indulge in after his basic needs--a career--are met, like the top end of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Therefore, if a career program has room for an elective or two, the advisor recommends another business or technology course, or a computer course. Even if the elective is

designated a humanities elective, the advisor will favor speech over literature, on the grounds that speech is more "useful." Sometimes the literature course is not recommended because lit profs are seen as disdainful of business and technology and, therefore, committed to undermining the students' choice of a career.

What's to be done? This is the time to become Renaissance people, offering liberal arts courses that are stimulating and creative to attract new markets: the career-oriented students as well as graduates who want enrichment. Maybe it's time for some career/liberal arts marriages. Just as the Renaissance opened new avenues to traditional learning, so have our times with gene-splitting, triage, artificial intelligence, and nanosecond information transmittal. Such new areas bring a quickening, a rebirth, our own renaissance. The curiousity and disciplined habits of learning of those of us in the liberal arts can be applied in exciting and broadening ways.

Should new course combinations replace the traditional literature courses? No. They should be seen as ways to open up literature to the student who is not likely to enroll in the traditional courses. Will he enroll in these? First, his advisor is more likely to suggest a course that is team-taught with a member of their department and the student sees an application to the career he is building. Further, such initial courses operate as an important recruitment

opportunity. In a course I teach with an economist, Money in Literature, students are attracted to other literature courses; they are also attracted to economics courses.

What else can help? Court the businessmen in your community. The study of literature has a great deal to offer business and technology, and while this is not generally understood by the makers of career program curriculums, it is understood by business leaders. At a recent AAC/NEH Conference on the Humanities and Careers in Business, Ralph Z. Sorenson, chief executive officer of the Barry Wright Corporation, stressed that humanities graduates have the capacity to educate themselves, the imagination to cope with the unknown, and the perspective to see beyond the short-term demands of the marketplace. AT&T Chairman Charles L. Brown noted humanities students have stronger verbal abilities, are more self-motivated, and show greater openness to change. William Bennett, chairman of NEH emphasized, "The humanities teach students to understand civilization...to distinguish between right and wrong...the noble and the base, and to know when a person is speaking rot."

One can hardly read Conrad, Kafka, or Kozinski without perceiving that the irrational can influence decisions; that things are not always what they seem, that a businessman can be an insect, an innocent a savant; that some problems have no ideal solution; that the world is not always textbook fair.

Does refocusing literature weaken our discipline? Not if the faculty member knows the discipline and knows how to teach. The key is the professor. The professors with strong content and an insistence on excellence offer a role model of values in higher education. If they insist on carefully written papers, arguments that are well substantiated, careful reading of texts, high standards for accomplishing tasks, the course will be well taught.

We're teaching what Robert Frost called "the joy of taking pains," the sense of fulfillment and pleasure at working at a task until it's perfect, until it reaches what your inner sense tells you is ideal. What we are teaching is a perception of the ideal and that it can be achieved, of how much is possible for humans to perceive and accomplish, and finally, the sense of joy that accomplishment produces.

It's what we have of value to pass along to the young. And our tool is literature.

May I finish with a section from the 25th chapter of ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE by Robert Pirsig:

"Technology is simply the making of things, and the making of things can't by its own nature be ugly, or there would be no possibility for beauty in the arts, which also include the making of things. Actually a root word of technology,

TECHNE, originally MEANT 'art.' The ancient Greeks never separated art from manufacture in their minds, and so never developed separate words for them.

"The way to resolve the conflict is to break down the barriers of dualistic thought that prevents a real understanding of what technology is--not an exploitation of nature, but a fusion of nature and the human spirit into a new kind of creation that transcends both.

"You can't live on just groovy emotions alone. You have to work with the underlying form of the universe too, the laws of nature which, when understood, can make work easier, sickness rarer, and famine almost absent.

"We have artists with no scientific knowledge and scientists with no artistic knowledge and both with no spiritual sense of gravity at all, and the result is not just bad, it is ghastly. The time for real reunification of art and technology is really long overdue."

Separating liberal arts and career preparation reflects dangerous thinking; it's a destructive dualism, one that closer ties to disciplines can help overcome.

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